

REVOLUTIONARY RHETORIC AND PURITANISM

Larzer Ziff

OXFORD UNIVERSITY

A century before John Adams made his first notable contribution to the debate that culminated in the American Revolution, the opponents of Governor Edmund Andros had been advised sharply that they could argue the privileges enjoyed by their parents in New England until the cows came in off the common, but all that such amounted to legally was claiming rights by precedent, and the colony was far too young to be entitled to such a claim. That disagreement, and any future disagreement with the Crown, it was made clear, would have to be argued in terms of British law rather than in terms of what was the nature of the best church and state for New England. The qualified spokesmen for the community would have to be trained in law rather than theology. Adams, who had entered upon the study of the law in preference to the ministry because he feared he was unsound in certain fundamental doctrines and because he was uneasy with what he called "frigid Calvinism," was, consequently, the kind of spokesman called for.

In 1765, as a basis for the stand taken against the Stamp Act, he constructed a history of Massachusetts, and at that date, some one hundred years after the Andros struggle, he could imply that the history of the colony did give its citizens a prescriptive right.

Growing directly out of opposition to civil and ecclesiastical tyranny in the Reformation, Adams explained, came the peopling of America. "It was not religion alone, as is commonly supposed" he said, "but it was a love of universal liberty . . . that projected, conducted, and accomplished the settlement of America."¹

Adams represented the American situation as the organic product of attitudes that were centuries old and that had been nurtured in England before their flowering in New England. He insisted upon their having been established not just as notions but as institutions of the society: a clergy more independent of the civil power than had ever before existed, and, in consequence, far more tied to industry, virtue, piety, and learning for its authority; an arrangement of property that held lands as from the King but that was contemptuous of quitrents; and a widespread system of public education as the principal guarantor against the resurgence of the dark forces of enslavement that had ex-

isted under pope and baron. "Let us take it for granted," Adams said in his conclusion,

that the same great spirit . . . which denounced hostilities against John till Magna Charta was signed, which severed the head of Charles the First from his body, and drove James the Second from his kingdom, the same great spirit (may heaven preserve it till the earth shall be no more) which first seated the great grandfather of his present most gracious majesty on the throne of Britain,—is still alive and active and warm in England; and that the same spirit in America, instead of provoking the inhabitants of that country, will endear us to them for ever and secure their good-will.²

In the last analysis, his was not a terribly tight legal argument, and, indeed, he later called it a "lamentable bagatelle." It provides, however, the basis for a good deal of what Adams was to say in his subsequent career. His version of Puritan history is secular rather than providential, and its importance resides in its justification of established institutions rather than in its providing a symbology of divine intent. When, in the peroration, a spirit is called upon, the "great spirit" that led to Magna Carta, it is, to be sure, sufficiently hypostatized so that it may be taken to have moved men from outside themselves, but not so strongly that it may not also be seen to have grown from the natural, reasonable reactions of men to intolerable conditions. Moreover, that spirit is shared by Europeans and Englishmen as well as Americans, albeit in an ascending degree.

In subsequent rhetoric before the Declaration of Independence, Adams was less sweeping in his portrait of Puritan history and more concerned with specific events within it. He consistently saw that history as organic, the long-evolved reason why Americans felt as they felt, did as they did, and were entitled to continue so feeling and so doing.

In his arguments he was quick to manipulate embarrassing precedents as well as to proclaim justifying ones. Can anyone who has not clearly in mind the context of the *Novanglus* letter of March 13, 1775, possibly guess the reference of "it" in the following sentence? "There is less to be said in excuse for it than the witchcraft or hanging the Quakers."³ What did the Puritans do that exceeded the egregiousness of their notorious persecutions? Nothing more than be passive in the receipt of the "present charter in lieu of the first."

More impressive than the anti-climax this statement may achieve today is the realization that it is difficult to doubt that had Adams been active in 1689 he would have sided with the party that accepted the charter Increase Mather negotiated, if for no other reason, than that the alternatives was bound to be worse. What Adams wants in 1775, regardless of what his doppelganger may have settled for a century earlier, is the destruction of any precedent that seems to strengthen the

claims of royal supremacy. If he cannot achieve this—the inexcusable did, after all, happen—he can at least turn the application away from one conclusion and establish another in its place: "It has been a warning to their posterity, and one principal motive with the people never to trust any agent with power to concede away their privileges again. . . . We shall never more submit to decrees in chancery, or acts or parliament, annihilating charters, or abridging English liberties."⁴ John Adams represented opposition as completely consistent with established institutions. Puritanism meant liberty within history.

The Declaration of Independence, however, was not continuous with the past Adams elaborated. By definition it meant fracture, and theorizing such as Adams's, whilst it may heal breaks, joining them to the processes of history after they occur, cannot by its very nature advocate them before the fact. Such advocacy comes from a different vantage, and, until the development of dialectical theory, that different vantage is a discontinuous view of history. Such is the outlook of *Common Sense*. The extraordinary effectiveness of Thomas Paine's pamphlet stems in good part from the successful way in which he overwhelms the arguments based on historical continuity, an attachment to which guided Whig as well as Tory.

Reacting against the prevailing filial imagery that structured thinking about the Anglo-American relationship, Paine explicitly denies England as parent—Europe is the progenitor he maintains; lest his readers nevertheless insist upon England's parental role, he dissolves the family by asking what ties remain after a parent has behaved with the brutality that he describes. There is no need to detail the attack Paine mounts on America's lingering sense of filial obligation; this argument is plain throughout his text, and it has frequently been taken up as a classic example of the cluster of ideas and feelings summed up in the image of the American Adam.

Further, however, one can argue that the phenomenal success of *Common Sense*, even in New England whence Abigail Adams wrote to John who was in Philadelphia in March 1776, "I am charmed with the sentiments of 'Common Sense,' and wonder how an honest heart . . . can hesitate one moment at adopting them,"⁵ must be related in great part to its remarkable treatment of Calvinism. Paine politely cites the Bible, admits that man is by nature morally defective, and relies upon God's common sense as well as upon man's. If not a totally convincing pious penman, he nevertheless here seems a man respectful of religion. Yet *Common Sense* drew a great portion of its persuasiveness by meeting the feelings of a large number of avowed Calvinists who, like the young John Adams, were chafing under the doctrine but were

so fully habituated to it as their world view that they could not identify, let alone articulate, it as the source of their profound discontent. *Common Sense* touched upon this bafflement and provided these repressed energies with an outlet without, in the short run, appearing to endanger piety. Your political destiny is not determined by your political past or any prior ordination, says Paine; the fathers are far less wise and far less pure than the sons, says Paine; you are all electors and therefore more powerful than the elected, says Paine.

Consider the following two pairs of quotations. Each half of each pair refers to the same religious concept as the other half, but if the two halves are taken together, as they certainly are not intended to be taken widely separated as they are in the text, the two together form a logical inconsistency. Such inconsistency, however, is annihilated by the rhetorical effect as Paine manages to cite both the sanction of religion and yet play upon impatience with its doctrines of human limitation.

Early in his work Paine says, "Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built on the ruins of the bowers of paradise."⁶ This statement is an acceptance of original sin and the consequent need for government. Sound enough, theologically. What is also planted here for flowering at a later moment is the notion that tyrants benefit from our belief in original sin, and although logically it is our sin that causes their office, rhetorically we are led to feel that it is their office that has caused our degradation.

Thus the second half of the pair which occurs at another point in the text: "To say that the right of all future generations is taken away by the act of the first electors in their choice, not only of a king but of a family of kings, forever, has no parallel in or out of scripture but the doctrine of original sin . . . and from such a comparison . . . hereditary succession can derive no glory."⁷ Nothing in this quotation denies the doctrine of original sin, but the man who accepts the invitation to overthrow a king because of the inglorious connection of the king's claim to rule with that doctrine is to be strongly suspected of being uneasy with that doctrine. His irritation at Calvin's God finds release through the imitator of that God, Paine's king.

Toward the close of *Common Sense* Paine puts forth a scheme for congressional government in America and says of it, "He that will promote discord under a government so equally formed as this would have joined Lucifer in his revolt."⁸ A Christian audience that does not want its contentiousness associated with the rebellion of the prideful underworld is thus turned away from the contemplation of this notion to the thought that it is those who resist republicanism who carry hell within them.

The partner to this quotation occurs earlier when Paine is arguing that events have outsped any hope of reconciliation and that the only expedient available is a war for independence. "Reconciliation," he writes, "is *now* a fallacious dream. Nature has deserted the connection, and art cannot supply her place. For, as Milton wisely expresses, 'never can true reconciliation grow where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep.'"⁹ Paine, of course, does not pause to let us remember that Milton's speaker is Satan and his audience the fallen angels. It is, indeed, a preordaining God, against whom one has longed to rebel, who organizes the rhetoric of *Common Sense*, and the fervor incited can rage with impunity, because at the crucial moment God is plucked away, and George is plumped down in his place.

Puritanism, we must remind ourselves, was originally and very powerfully a political movement, not a theological school. As a ruling political movement in New England it came also to be a culture and lost a dominating sense of its political origins. Yet they were there for Adams to evoke, quite validly for all the fancifulness of certain of his details. Puritan history could trenchantly be cited in the cause of liberty and opposition to unjust authority. The religious belief at the core of that history, however, resisted the application of Puritanism to the overthrow of ultimate unified authority.

To take this step one had first to come to terms with the resisting core. This Paine did by granting it moral weight and yet detaching it from politics. James the First knew what he was talking about when he said, "No bishop, no king." His opponents sincerely meant to remove the bishop and preserve the king, but, in the event, a king lost his head. So Paine knew in 1776 that his argument came down to "No king, no God," but that should have been George's line in the debate and if George had not the wit to use it there was no common sense in spelling it out for him.

NOTES

¹ John Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law," in *Works*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1865), III, 451.

² Adams, *Works*, III, 461-62.

³ Adams, *Works*, IV, 128.

⁴ Adams, *Works*, IV, 128.

⁵ Abigail Adams, *Letters* (Boston, 1840), I, 88.

⁶ *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. M.D. Conway (New York, 1969), I, 69.

⁷ Paine, *Writings*, I, 81.

⁸ Paine, *Writings*, I, 97.

⁹ Paine, *Writings*, I, 91.